

Sam Cardon Interview

INTERVIEWER: What websites would you recommend for students that are interested in this field?

CARDON: Outside of researching, I don't use the web that much for what I do, except for transferring files back and forth for people I am working with. However, I have found a couple of sites. I have had a pretty rich experience with ethnic and indigenous music on a website called CDRoots.com.

INTERVIEWER: Oh really?

CARDON: Almost any music you can possibly imagine, anywhere in the world is on this site. I've had people call up and say, "Well, I really want some music from Jaba." You can't go down to your local record store and get it; you can't even get it on iTunes, but you can go to CDRoots. People also say something like, "I would like some seventeenth century fiddle music from Sweden" and you can go to CDRoots and you will find something on there; so that's been a really interesting site.

Also, I have collaborated quite a bit with lyricists, so Rhymezone.com is an amazing site. I use that all the time. It is an instantaneous rhyming dictionary where there are synonyms, antonyms, definitions, words that are used in Shakespeare, etc. You can find all kinds of things like that. One other one I found that is really entertaining is the Shakespearean Insulter, which is very funny.

I find I use the internet all the time for transferring files, but I am not on it all that much to do work.

INTERVIEWER: That's okay. What do you consider essential reading, hearing, or seeing in the field?

CARDON: I have thought about that a lot and I have realized, that any reading of really great literature is a good preparation for anything we do. I have found that anything really inspiring applies in some way to what I am writing; it doesn't have to have anything to do with my assignment. It just needs to inspire me to do something. If I simply read something that is really elevating and inspiring, I find that it motivates the things inside of me.

That same thing goes with music. I will get an assignment, and instead of listening to something that might fit specifically with what I am doing, I just listen to the greatest thing I can get my hands on or whatever I happen to be interested in at that moment. I could be doing something that has a classical slant to it, but a great jazz piece of music will inspire me – it will get my mind engaged and make the attempt to create music.

As far as hearing, I just like exposing myself to music. I have a career, especially in the last ten years or so, in film. Film composers are expected to be familiar with all different styles of music. I have found that if I will go to anything – whether it's a rock concert, a folk music concert, a classical concert, or a jazz concert – my interest will be peaked in something.

The other thing I have found very useful is to network with people I really respect. I had this habit for a while, where I would ask people that I associated with, or whom I

wanted to associate with, to give me their ten favorite books that they have ever read, or to tell me their ten favorite pieces of music. I found some really incredible discoveries through that process, and I also found some pretty unlikely things that I've received rich rewards from.

INTERVIEWER: So, you ask people for their favorite ten pieces or ten books or other things, and that's really been helpful?

CARDON: Yes. A few years ago, I was invited to participate in the Mormon Art Symposium, which I really enjoyed as I rubbed shoulders with artists of different disciplines. My wife and I, for whatever reason, have kind of attached ourselves to some visual artists. We got to know some of those people really well and just connected. They have been really inspiring for me. In addition, their wives have been really inspiring for my wife. It has been a really great association.

INTERVIEWER: Do you do this in a social situation?

CARDON: It started out at the conference and then it moved into a more social kind of relationship, which has been really kind of rewarding. We very much enjoyed our associations. I think that anything that creates interest and diversity, and makes your life feel richer is really good for inspiration, and it is nurturing.

INTERVIEWER: What advice would you give to an up-and-coming student in this area, particularly regarding achieving success in the professional world?

CARDON: Never give up. An important element in any kind of field related to the arts is talent. It is hard to determine whether someone has talent. I certainly have met quite a few people who have surprised me over the years, including myself. Therefore, I would never put myself in a position to try to judge that.

However, I have seen some people who have the curse of talent, where they have just enough to want to do it badly, but not quite enough to be able to do it professionally. If the talent is there, it is just a matter of not giving up, because there are plenty of opportunities to get discouraged in this field. It is not an easy start up. I have told people that.

Parents will come and ask me about this field if their child is interested in it, and parents don't necessarily like this field. I say to have the same expectations that you do of your medical student, where you are not going to expect them to do anything productive for at least ten years – they are going to be going through school and getting in debt, and they are going to be going to graduate school, and getting an internship and residency and that kind of thing, and then at some point, because we all know that is a tried and true method, we have great confidence they are going to make it. In this kind of a field it is the same track. It takes about that much time, but then it is very much like any professional field. It takes given talent. Certainly I know there are some frustrated doctors out there who would have enjoyed a field in the arts much better. I have met a number that feel that way.

INTERVIEWER: Historically, I might mention that that has been true as far as theater is concerned. Anton Chekhov, who was one of the greatest Russian playwrights, was an MD.

CARDON: I did not know that.

INTERVIEWER: He really wanted to be a theater artist, and there are a number of other examples like that. So, in theater I know that is true as well. I think the comparison is a good one because of that ten year period. The one stinger in there is if there is talent.

CARDON: The ten year period was also the length of time it took me to get my undergraduate degree.

INTERVIEWER: What year did you graduate?

CARDON: I can't remember because it was too recent. Let's put it this way, my kids were applauding from the balcony.

INTERVIEWER: What brought or brings you the greatest satisfaction or happiness in your career, and what is the most frustrating?

CARDON: That is a really great question. I love the people I associate with. I find them fascinating, and there are always artistic minds hanging around our house, which is really fun for me, and I think it is fun for my family as well. It is just interesting. I love that about it. It is fulfilling. The fact that I get to do what I feel like I was born to do is an amazing blessing.

Really, my only frustrations are deadlines. There is just an endless stream of deadlines to the point where every day I am behind. That is absolutely the truth. There is not a day that goes by where I don't feel like I have to play catch-up in some way.

The second thing applies especially in the composing for film realm; it is a very solitary occupation. Before, I was very involved in jazz and contemporary music, which is very much collaborative. Film lets you be around your best friends all day long, in a studio situation where you are actually interacting with other human beings. It is really a joyful experience. Composing is much more solitary, and I am not really oriented that way. Frankly that is really my biggest challenge; to just be by myself and to be okay with that.

My wife is good company, but there are certain things that you get from peers and associates that you can not get from your own family. I have chosen to work at home, so my family has taken the place of those peers and professional colleagues. There are huge benefits to that, but there are also some casualties.

INTERVIEWER: Let me ask you another question that is not related to this. When you compose a score for a film, do you conduct it or is somebody else hired to do that?

CARDON: I have conducted but I really do not enjoy that process, mainly because I did not feel like I had really prepared myself for it. I frequently hire my good friend, Kurt Bestor to conduct for me. He has command of the orchestra and is a great, charismatic person, so even in a completely strange environment he tends to demand attention at the podium, which is really nice. Then I can focus entirely on what the orchestra sounds like and worry about intonation and balance and things like that.

INTERVIEWER: So you are there and you can participate that way, but you don't necessarily conduct?

CARDON: I am usually listening from the recording studio, but there have been times when I have conducted. I conducted once in front of the Utah Symphony, and my baton went sailing through the viola section on my very first down beat. I think that was maybe a premonition of what was to come – there could have been a serious injury there.

INTERVIEWER: Well Kurt is a very good friend. He and his family lived in my ward when I was Bishop, so I have known him for a long time. I noticed, in going back and doing a little research that you have collaborated with him on several projects.

CARDON: Kurt and I have an interesting history. When we were students at BYU, I remember having a conversation with him where we decided that we could either be competitors or we could join forces. So, we became partners and we literally wrote every note together for seven or eight years. It was great for both of us. I really thoroughly enjoyed that experience. Until this day he really is like a brother to me and I trust him explicitly. It is always fun to have him involved in my projects because he knows so much about my work and understands it. There is so much non-verbal communicating that happens.

INTERVIEWER: He knows where it comes from rather than just looking at the outcomes.

CARDON: We literally lived the United Order for a while – if he had a project he was paying my bills and vice versa. It was a great way to make our way through school. We've continued our personal and business relationship until this day. I love it.

INTERVIEWER: Has being an active member of the Church affected your work in the field?

CARDON: Absolutely. Being active forms everything that I do. I remember hearing, I think it was Orson Scott Card, say that doing your church work is more important to your art than doing your art is to your art. I think it is really true that it gives you richness to your life so you then have something to respond to. You are not an empty vessel. I think that being active in that way, engaging your spiritual life, is so crucial to the creative process. I can not imagine not having that be a part of what I do. It is kind of interesting, I have gone in and out of responsibilities that were more and less intense, and I think I was the most productive artistically when I had the most intense Church jobs, in an odd, weird kind of a way.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of Church jobs have you had?

CARDON: Well, I have been in a couple Bishoprics and High Councils – which is an interesting challenge for everybody involved there. The more I have been involved in my ward activities, it seems like my music is just better. Maybe the Lord is compensating in someway, or maybe you just feel more complete as a person, so things come easier. I don't know. I have never really evaluated that as I should.

INTERVIEWER: How and why did you choose to work in this field?

CARDON: I had no other marketable skill! It was a pretty easy choice for me.

My father was a builder and I love that until this day – the smell of sawdust as you go by a construction site still conjures up great memories. I have three brothers and we all worked as indentured servants for our father and spent many happy hours working together. If I would have found myself in a field like that and I probably would have been very happy.

I do appreciate my very normal upbringing because that is what I want for myself. I have no desire to fuel any eccentricities. I love feeling like a normal person while at the same time getting this conduit into the exotic world of the arts. I think that is a very fun combination – trying to live your life in a normal way but at the same time doing something that is very unusual. I love that about this field.

INTERVIEWER: Anything else you would advise a student to do who is interested in this field?

CARDON: Some advice that was given to me early on, by my mentor Newell Dayley, who I think most people in the professional music world would credit as being able to survive and have a career in the music business, was “Luck is when opportunity meets preparation.” That has always stuck with me.

A couple of other philosophies I have found in my own career are to be willing to do what other people aren’t willing to do. I have heard that as the definition of trying to achieve success, and I think that is really, particularly true with this. Mine and Kurt’s first opportunities came from the television networks. They would give us stuff that they knew no one else would do. Literally, that was the start because we would do anything. If it was a deadline that had to be turned around in 24 hours, with little recognition if any involved, we would still do it.

The other thing is to always exceed expectations. That is especially true when you are a student. If you can take advantage of opportunities while you are a student, and do things on a professional level, the word gets around and suddenly you find yourself in a situation where you are having more opportunities. At each stage along the way, get to know what the expectations are and then work so hard that you exceed them, then every opportunity leads to another one.

Those have been really important things for me to keep in mind along the way. I have found them to be absolutely true. I would say that most of the people I know working put those principles into action.

The other thing is to find a really good mentor. Newell Dayley didn’t install himself, he just became it. He actually assigned me a mentor. He asked me what I wanted to do and there was a composer named Dave Grusin doing jazz, films scores, pop music, and all kinds of different things – he did all the things I liked so he was my mentor. Newell just gave me the assignment. But I think it is important to attach yourself to someone who inspires you, who you would feel good about emulating; that is an important thing.

Inform yourself of every possible way that you can network. When I was at BYU, I remember going and talking to Tad Danielewski, who was in charge of the film program at that time. He let me audit a director’s workshop. I had no understanding of acting or directing, but it was fascinating for me to be around those people. To this day I work with friends that I met there. Especially while you are in school, the networking aspect is crucial. We all feel like we don’t need to in order to pursue something, but we do.

INTERVIEWER: Not only in the narrow area you work in, but also in a much broader perspective as well.